



POOR LITTLE LANTY MIGGS AND THE FOUR WIZARDS' STRANGE APPLES

How He Secured One of the Magic Fruit and the Wonderful Thing That Happened to Him and His Mother

AMONG all the boys in the school Lanty Miggs was no doubt the most unfortunate; for, besides being fatherless, poor, ragged and hungry, his seat was so placed that the torments of an abnormal appetite were rendered far more painful. He sat by a window which opened exactly opposite another in a great hotel next door and only a few feet away.

Looking into this window Lanty gazed, whenever he lifted his eyes from his book, upon scenes that stirred the very fibres of his being, upon objects that tore at his very vitals with such tugs that often he felt almost sick, and which filled his sleeping hours with dreams of bliss unspeakable. It was impossible to resist gazing upon these tempting visions, much as he struggled and tried to keep his mind fixed on his lessons, for that window was the window of the hotel kitchen, and that hotel was famous all over the land for its marvelous dishes.

Worse than all, perhaps, was the fact that right there, beside the poor, half-starved lad, was the station of the pastry-cook, a big, fat, easy-moving colored woman, and the hourly displays of luscious pies, rich cakes of every description, dainty confections, nameless, but, oh! so hunger-provoking, showed close to the window-sill on broad trays, made the boy's school life one of alternate torture and thrilling bliss.

Other boys, of course, knew of this display, for such a thing is impossible to conceal for many hours from a lad's eyes, but they didn't have the constant opportunity of looking upon it in all its ravishing, glorious variations.

To sit unmoved while, with the rolling seasons, there passed a review of smoking, flaky-lidded, brown pies—lemon, apple, peach, pumpkin and mince—would be almost impossible to a lad who was used to having all these at home, but think of the unspeakable torments of Lanty, who never, never, by any chance, tasted pie more than once or twice a year.

Think of studying one's arithmetic when a chocolate layer-cake, two feet wide, was spread enticingly under one's nose, yet far beyond reach!

Conceive of a half-starved boy, two hours from luncheon-time, sitting with his mind fixed on the map of Arizona and cream-puffs bursting with richness, flanked by iced angel-cake and chocolate eclairs to entice the wandering eye, while all the air was scented with the tantalizing fragrance of turtle soup, roast beef, lobster à la Newberg, clam flitters and the whole bill of fare of the hotel wafting out in billows of aroma that completely unnerved the boy.

One day, while the fat cook was gossiping in a distant part of the hotel kitchen, Lanty suddenly conceived a desperate and bold, yet ingenious, scheme. There was a long, slim pole with a sort of iron hook on the end, that was used to lower the window sashes from the top, and as he mused upon his unfortunate situation Lanty's eyes fell on it. In another minute he had conceived a plan, and as soon as school was out he went to work to complete his preparations.

He procured a long nail and filed off its head, then sharpened both ends. Getting to school, for once, before either the teacher or any of the scholars, he hammered the nail into the lower end of the window pole, thus forming a spear, with which he was quite sure he could impale more than one piece of cake, and, perhaps, manage to snatch even a few pieces of pie.

Mr. Sheter, the teacher, always read a book at recess, and Lanty meant to stay indoors then, and if the cook happened to stroll away, the cakes were his unless the pole failed.

He knew that remaining indoors would attract attention, and he began to prepare for the hour by pretending that his head ached. He was so tickled with the boldness and cleverness of his scheme that it was almost impossible to keep up the pretense of a headache, and his eye glittered so keenly that Mr. Sheter noticed it and asked him if he was ill, thinking that he had a fever.

All this helped Lanty toward success, but when recess came the cook refused to leave her place at the window, where she was busy cutting up a slab of golden cake into little portions. Lanty squirmed in rage. They were just the right size to spear with the nail, yet she never moved.

Recess passed, and alas! with it all chance of getting a single cake. Lanty went home mad clean through. That night, in his dreams of whole States made of cake and mountains of cream puffs, he talked in his sleep and gave the whole business away. His mother heard him, and in the morning a few questions revealed the scheme. Mrs. Miggs told him how wicked it was, and finally Lanty promised to relinquish his plan.

He gave it up entirely; but, having no further use for the spear, he revealed the plot to Rodney Schneider, who, after school was out, deftly snatched thirteen lady fingers and ten apricot tarts from the hotel window ledge! And the villain never shared with Lanty, but ate them all himself and was sick. His theft having been observed by a guest in the hotel, complaint was made, and Rodney was expelled from school, so you may be sure Lanty was very glad that he hadn't operated the "pie snatcher," as he called the device.

Now Lanty's home was near what was called the

"old waterworks," the only remains of which was a great round cistern of stones, grass-grown at the top and sprinkled with tomato cans, broken bottles, tin pans and other refuse at the even more thickly grass-grown bottom. The wall was smooth and unbroken within, but on the outside many a crumbled stone and gaping crevice permitted a foothold to a daring climber, and at the top this great wall was broad enough for two lads to sit side by side and look down into the great cistern, or gaze over the surrounding fields, and this was Lanty's favorite occupation.

The house was but a few feet from the side of the cistern, and Lanty's bedroom window overlooked its yawning cavity, into which he had more than once been lowered by a rope to rescue a stray baseball or an arrow mis-aimed.

It seemed like some vast prison, with its smooth, unbroken walls, and many a boy shuddered when he was down there, even in broad daylight.

But, after all their familiarity with its secrets, not one of the boys really knew to what use the cistern was being put after the sun went down, until Lanty made the discovery.

The moon was high in a cloudless sky one night when the boy suddenly awoke, and, obeying some impulse for which he could not account, went to his window and looked out over the reservoir. Instantly he started in amazement at beholding, down within the walled circle of stone, a bright illumination like a great electric light.

A second glance showed him that it came from a gigantic pumpkin in which round holes had been cut, forming a lamp, through the transparent sides of which the light penetrated, but what the light was he could not discern.

He didn't speculate long about it, either, for around the stone slab sat four figures that took all of his attention. They were men, but such weird and uncouth men as had never, certainly, been seen in the town before. Clad in woolen robes of different colors, black, red, yellow and green, and all covered with strange, mysterious figures and emblems from head to foot, with long, white beards that flowed to the ground, with flaming eyes and hooked noses, each one resembled the other, yet each was totally different.

They sat around the stone slab in silence when he first discovered them, as if pondering upon some important matter. In the centre of the slab he observed four large, red apples, which he supposed was to be the feast provided for these mysterious, silent men, but while he watched one of them spoke and said:

"It is plain that our Master is not coming, and it behooves us to arrive at a decision ere the cock crows, else we will have wasted a night!"

"Let us have peace!" interrupted the man in yellow, who had, until now, remained silent. "Let us first compare our power, and to the one whom we decide to be the most powerful shall be given the direction of our conduct until our Master can himself instruct us. First, as to the magic apples which each in his own skillful way has secured from the Garden of the Hesperides."

"Mine I consider to be the most valuable, and to bring to its owner the greatest privileges. It gives him who carries it the power of being to all outward seeming, anybody he desires, so that he can impersonate any living human being without fear of detection! That certainly is a marvelously great power, and one that I consider places me at the head of all wizards now living!"

"But my apple is greater!" cried the man in black; "it gives me the power to compel obedience from anybody, whether emperor or slave, merely by breathing a wish! What more can one want?"

"Yet I do more than that," said the green-robed

wizard; "my apple opens all things to my inspection. The human mind, underground caverns, secret vaults, women's hearts and closed books are all plain to me, and nothing concealed escapes my vision. Thus I am far more powerful than all of you!"

"Not so," interrupted the man in red. "Mine is the greatest force, for it compels all to love me!" At this all the others laughed, and Lanty felt like joining them, for the face of the man in red was like a wolf's, so fierce and hungry-looking were his eyes and his snarling mouth, and the idea of anybody loving him was really funny.

"We may wrangle here all night, for it's impossible for us to agree!" exclaimed the man in black. "Now, I have a plan! To-morrow night we will meet here again, and wait one hour for the Master; and, if he come not, then we will place the four apples upon the table, put out the light and each shall take one, but not his own. After one week of trial we will again exchange apples, and thus until each has tested all, after which we may, perhaps,

arrive at a conclusion. What think you?"

After a brief space filled with deep pondering each one said that the plan suited him, and all arose.

Lanty pondered over the strange occurrence, and, as the night wore on, his yearning to own one of those apples grew. Finally, when morning came, he had formed a bold plan, based on his endeavor to capture the cakes from the hotel kitchen, although he felt a little uncertain as to its propriety, for those apples were the property of the wizards, and although, as he well knew, it is against the ancient law of the land to be a wizard, yet they have some rights. But he was afraid to ask his mother about it, and resolved to get an apple first, if possible, and consider the propriety of the matter afterward.

So he went to work instantly after breakfast to prepare another spear, long and light and of sufficient length to reach from the high wall to the stone table in the centre. Then he made a light ladder, also, so that he could climb noiselessly up the wall without betraying his presence. All day long he turned the project over in his mind, but no better plan presented itself, and when at last the long day ended he went to his room, but not to bed. Indeed, he never even thought of sleeping!

At about 10 o'clock, however, he fell asleep at the window, awaking as the clock struck 12 with a start and a horrible fear that he had overslept, but on looking into the reservoir he saw the wizards sitting there waiting for the one they called Master. He slipped out, and in two minutes had stealthily climbed the wall and was looking directly down upon them.

"We have waited long enough!" said the man in red, suddenly. "I am tired. Let us begin the contest without further parley. Here are the apples ready. Put out the light and let us settle it!"

"All right," seconded the green-robed wizard. "Out she goes!"

The next moment a black pall fell over them, and at the same time Lanty, who was all ready, jabbed at the centre of the great stone with his spear. He knew instantly by the weight that he had secured a prize, and he at once slid down the ladder and ran with it. He heard a sound of squabbling behind the wall as he escaped, and knew that the wizards were quarreling over the missing apple that he now had in his hand, and the thought made him run faster yet.

He had the prize, and it would take a pretty swift wizard to catch him. But, swift as he was, he might have been caught, no doubt, had not the cock crowed just then, and, of course, the wizards were compelled to take their departure at once.

He hid in the woods, for he was afraid to go home until daylight, for his house was too near the reservoir for safety, and he feared the wizards might trace him by his footprints, but in the daylight his fear left him, and nothing remained but exultation over his triumph. He didn't know which apple he had secured, but that wouldn't take long to decide.

"I'll bet it's the one that opens everything!" he said, when he had examined the ruddy apple and found it looked exactly like any other. "I didn't want that one, but here goes. I'd like to see right through the house!"

Well, nothing happened; the wall remaining perfectly impenetrable, and then he concluded that he had the loving apple, but Teeter Williams coming along a few minutes later and scowling as fiercely as ever at him, he realized that its magic was of another sort, and said:

"I wish that I looked like old man Richards!"

He instantly realized that he had changed, for he felt weak and feeble and his steps were uncertain, while he could scarcely see across the street; yet the cheerful jingle of gold coins in his pocket, something never before heard by him, seemed to give him

a feeling of elation. A moment later an old woman stopped him and said:

"Oh, Mr. Richards, my husband has been looking for you, and he is in such trouble, for he can't pay you the money on the mortgage."

"How much is it?" asked Lanty, feeling in his pocket among the coins.

"Seven hundred dollars!" she replied, surprised that the old skinflint did not remember.

Lanty found a roll of big bills in his coat pocket, but his boyish heart had now hardened to something like old miser Richards' own, and he replied:

"Well, I can't help you! The money must be paid to-day! Don't bother me with your troubles. I've too many of my own!"

She crept away weeping, and he smiled. A few steps farther on he met a man who spoke to him rather gruffly, saying:

"Well, Richards, old Abner Hayden is dead and leaves his family nothing but a ticket to the poor-house."

"That's no concern of mine," replied the miser. "I am not responsible!"

"Yes, you are!" declared the man. "You used to sell him liquor when you kept the tavern, making him drunk every night, until he owed you so much money that you took his house away from him."

"That was business!" asserted old man Richards. "I'd do it again!"

"You ought to be hung!" declared the man as he walked away disgusted, and Lanty passed on.

As he thought of that piece of clever practice he felt that, after all, he could stand the loss of a thousand, and then Lanty realized that he was getting to be old Richards' very self instead of merely looking like him.

He instantly resolved to check this gradual change, and to do something while he was masquerading as the old miser that would benefit those whom he had robbed and swindled. Without more ado he hastened away, and before noon had made ample amends, for he had restored to many people that which they had lost, had given many thousands in checks on the bank of which old Richards was president, actually sitting at his desk to do it.

He wondered as he sent his mother a couple of thousand dollars, the sum Richards had cheated her out of twenty years before, why the old man himself didn't turn up at the bank, but at last the day was done and he was tired of it all, so he wished to be Lanty Miggs again, and on arriving home his mother said:

"Dear me! I've been waiting for you all the afternoon. Old Richards sent me two thousand dollars, saying that he had cheated me years ago, and just now I heard that he died this afternoon!"

It was true! While the boy had been making amends the narrow soul of the miser had slipped away without learning that at last he had given some people a chance to say a good word for him. Lanty wished, as he went to bed that night, that he had been a little more generous and sent himself a few thousand with which to start a paper store or something, but, alas, the chance was gone.

However, he determined next day to look like the King of England, although he didn't reason how that would benefit him in a little country town, but when he awoke in the morning all prepared to impersonate a handsome and good humored king, dressed himself in a hurry and ran down stairs to get the magic apple out of his coat pocket where he had left it, lo! the ruddy cheeked fruit was gone!

He at once concluded that the wizard had entered the house and taken it. A madder boy you never saw! He regretted his carelessness, although had one of the mighty wizards learned that the boy had his apple, he could have easily rescued it, even had Lanty taken it to bed with him, as he had intended. He was so downcast at the breakfast table that his mother noticed his gloomy brow, and asked the cause of his sadness.

"Oh, nothing much," Lanty replied, sullenly. "I only lost an apple, but it was a peach!"

"Why, how can that be?" queried his mother, laughing. "Two kinds of fruit in one! Now that couldn't be the one I found in your pocket this morning, for that was only a red apple and hadn't a suggestion of a peach about it!"

"What did you do with it?" asked Lanty, eagerly. "Why, I ate it," replied Mrs. Miggs, and then, seeing the look of horror and bitter agony on her son's face, she cried:

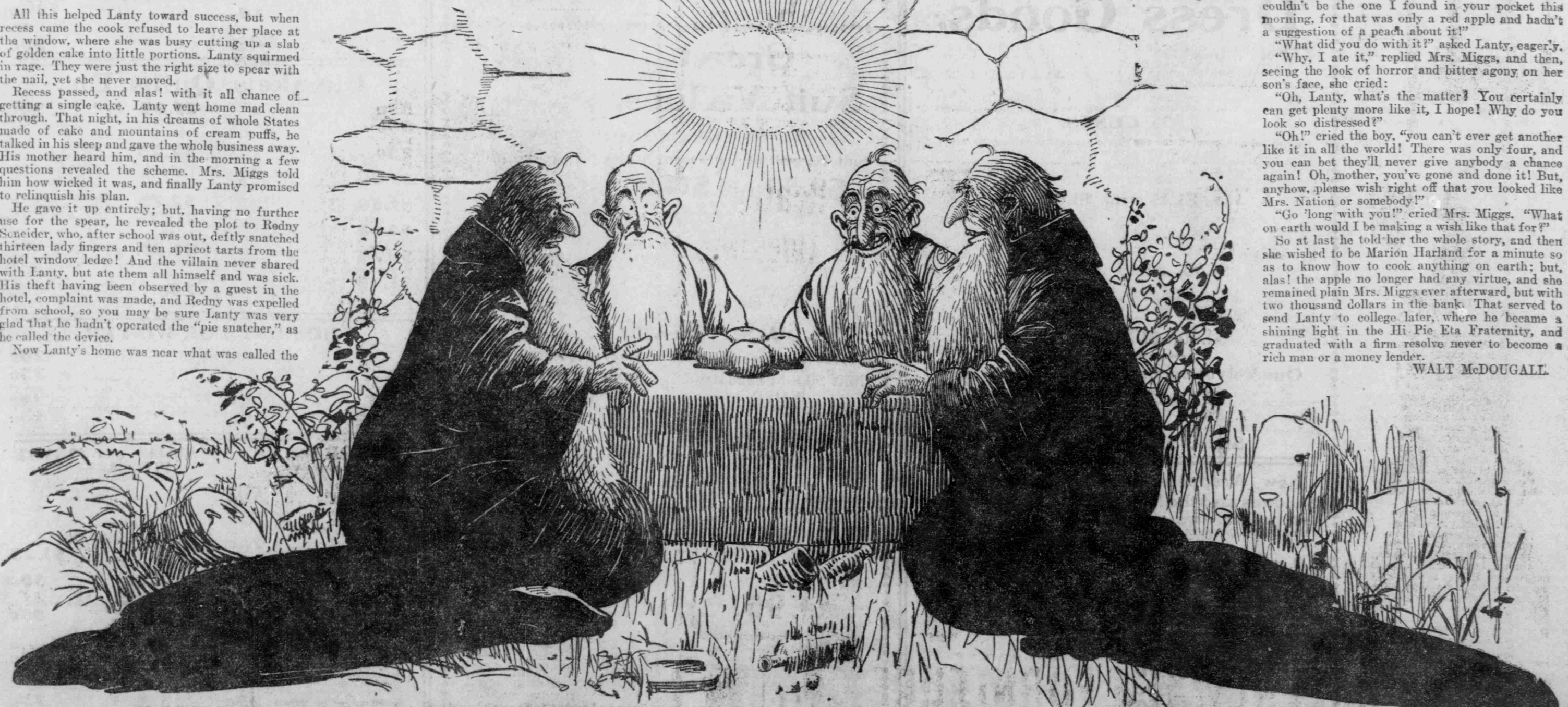
"Oh, Lanty, what's the matter? You certainly can get plenty more like it, I hope! Why do you look so distressed?"

"Oh!" cried the boy, "you can't ever get another like it in all the world! There was only four, and you can bet they'll never give anybody a chance again! Oh, mother, you've gone and done it! But, anyhow, please wish right off that you looked like Mrs. Nation or somebody!"

"Go along with you!" cried Mrs. Miggs. "What on earth would I be making a wish like that for?"

So at last he told her the whole story, and then she wished to be Marion Harland for a minute so as to know how to cook anything on earth; but, alas! the apple no longer had any virtue, and she remained plain Mrs. Miggs ever afterward, but with two thousand dollars in the bank. That served to send Lanty to college later, where he became a shining light in the Hi Pie Eta Fraternity, and graduated with a firm resolve never to become a rich man or a money lender.

WALT McDUGALL.



HE SAW THE FOUR WIZARDS SITTING AROUND THE FOUR APPLES IN THE WELL